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ABSTRACT

The philosophy of the ungraded program is basically that the cld methods of scheduling, placement by grades, marking, and requiring irrelevant courses should be replaced by restructured programs which meet both the needs and the interests of the individual student by allowing him to direct his own English study. In an effective ungraded program, the student chooses his own subject matter and is placed and graded according to his own learning rate and achievement level. More than 25 ungraded programs in high school English across the United States were observed first-hand to discover such innovaticns as teacher-pupil contracts, pre-written units called Learning Activity Packages, individualized instruction, and student options of traditional or innovative courses. After evaluating them all, it was decided that the ungraded English program which structures courses on phase levels and requires the student to follow a certain sequence in selecting his courses would best encourage the personal initiative and infinite potential of both student and faculty. (Materials include a brief resume of unique ungraded English programs at Amherst, Massachusetts; Broward County, Florida; Las Vegas, Nevada; Middletown, Rhode Island; Phoenix, Arizona; Azusa, California; and Corvallis, Oregon.) (DB)

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A THUMB-NAIL REVIEW OF A FEW

A Special Report on Ungraded or Non-graded Programs in English

by DOROTHY F. MILES

In the dynamic year of 1968-69, how ideal—how relevant to the changing state of society—was English education in my school? Plagued by agonizing doubts, I applied for leave to investigate "innovative programs" in high school English around the U.S. The new theories which seemed to capture the imagination and set my head reeling and teeming with wild possibilities appeared all to fall under the category of *ungraded* (or *non-graded*) programs of study.

Although as of last year any kind of serious innovation in high school English was still sparse, there were nonetheless experiments in the new ungraded curricula burgeoning all the way from Vermont to Florida, from New York to California. Yet no one seemed to know much about them! There was no common pool of information regarding them. All seemed to be operating independently, either deliberately or unintentionally unaware of any ungraded programs other than their own. Clearly there was a need for some kind of survey or summary.

Many questions had to be answered if I were to challenge the traditional methods of scheduling and pupil placement built into our system for over three centuries. Proposing something as radical as a change to ungradedness required that I be thoroughly informed on the subject. What is the educational philosophy upon which the ungraded programs are based? How can this philosophy be supported? How do ungraded programs function? How much real change in content results? How are pupils and teachers affected? How are school committees and administrators persuaded to accept the new ideas and provide funds for their implementation?

I hardly knew where or how to begin but decided to initiate my study by making personal visitations to some of our New England schools known to be experimenting with ungraded programs and then to proceed to Florida, the Mid-West, California, Nevada, Arizona, and New York.*

**I omitted Trenton, Michigan, as I felt conferences and seminars had made us all aware of the Apex program.*

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Written articles were taboo! I would trust nothing other than what I saw and what I heard at first-hand.

I returned inspired and ready to convince my school system that there was an immediate imperative for a new and different program in English in our school:

1. one that would put some measure of academic progress within the range of every pupil, regardless of ability, by *eliminating the old marking system.*
2. one that would consider individual interests and correct deficiencies by *providing special, newly-constructed courses to serve the needs of pupils on varying achievement levels.*
3. one that would put an end to the monotony of repetition of materials already mastered by *eliminating courses which have long outlived their relevance or their value.*
4. one that would put student power to some constructive use by *freeing them from a superimposed, factitious curriculum and entrusting students with more responsibility for the directing and channeling of their own study of English.*

I know this sounds like a big order, but the battle with the committee and administration was finally won, and my department is now engaged in the arduous but exhilarating process of writing an entirely new ungraded course of optional studies for our senior high school. Although our program is to allow freedom of choice in subject matter and ability levels, it is not our intention that English at Marblehead will become a reckless free-for-all. Our plan has, what we like to call a "built-in radar control," devised by the English staff and designed to prevent students from making too many unrewarding choices. However, no pupil in our school is to be penalized for making a few honest mistakes.

To discuss, however, the unique plan which we are attempting to work out would not be to the purpose of this paper. Rather I would share with the readers of the *Leaflet* and with so many of you who have indicated an interest in knowing more about ungradedness in English some of my experiences and thoughts on the subject, and hopefully help you initiate such a program, should you wish to do so.

What Is Ungradedness?

Ungradedness, or non-gradedness, (the terms are loosely interchangeable) does not mean giving no marks or grades as many mistakenly infer. Other than that, ungradedness seems to have as many varieties

of interpretation as there are schools employed in experimenting with it. Yet despite the multi-faceted programs evolving in the schools I visited, there did seem to be some basic ideas common to all programs.

Basic Philosophy	Basic Implementation
1. All have dismissed the traditional idea of *placement by grades* in English as unsound on the basis that wide fluctuations exist between the linguistic abilities and literary sophistication of pupils in the relatively same chronological age group.	1. English courses are no longer designed as 10th, 11th, or 12th grade courses. All courses are offered to all pupils.
2. All have proposed that pupils in English should be permitted to work at their own achievement levels and at their own learning rates.	2. English courses are restructured to meet the specific needs (deficiencies) or interests (abilities) of individual pupils without regard to chronological age, factitious standards or year in high school.
3. All have agreed that this principle, in turn, requires that pupils be evaluated at their own achievement levels and at their own learning rate.	3. New methods for marking or grading pupils at their own achievement and learning levels are devised, and appropriate report cards are designed to evaluate the pupils under the new programs.

The basic supporting philosophy for ungradedness—that the abilities of students in any tenth grade English class, for example, can vary all the way from Grade 3 to Grade 13—has been validated by many research studies. A convincing compilation of this kind of data is the chart, prepared for Valley High School in Las Vegas under a grant from the Kettering Foundation, of three male students, all in the eleventh grade; however, one of them ranks in the 24%ile in English skills and in the 18%ile in qualitative thinking. A second pupil ranks in the 96%ile in English and in the 99%ile in qualitative thinking! While such statistics may be a shock to school committees and administrators, these are facts

of common knowledge among English teachers, but facts which heretofore we have failed to face up to or to act upon.

I visited over twenty-five ungraded schools. In each school, English departments had openly admitted to the irrelevance of the traditional method of pupil placement, and all were attempting to do something about the wide disparity of pupil abilities in English. Committed to the philosophy of ungradedness, they had gone forth to conquer the conventional demons—assaulting the old methods of scheduling, placement, and marking—tearing curricula apart and then proceeding to build something unique and imaginative from the ruins of the old. The variety of exciting programs which emerged (not one was similar!) bears witness to the creativity of teachers and educators who *can* get tuned in on the contemporary wave length once they are willing to accept a challenge to themselves and to our conventional system.

A Thumb-Nail Review of a Few Unique Programs

Testimony of the students at Amherst Regional High School in Amherst, Massachusetts, corroborates that Amherst is operating a highly successful program in ungraded studies on the basis of the Dalton Plan of the pupil-teacher contracts. Courses are "phased" on five achievement levels and all courses are offered on an optional basis to all pupils. Pupils select their own phase level as well as their course and agree, *by contract with the teacher,* to work to the expected achievement level. I found Amherst pupils are particularly enthusiastic about their many course offerings, particularly The Bible as Literature, designed for them at three different levels. Yet one girl honestly admitted, "I enjoy the new offerings but find I am quite traditional in my options. I'm sticking to American Literature and Shakespeare for this year at least." Another student expressed his enthusiasm for the independent study program which had released him to pursue specialized English courses at the University of Massachusetts.

I found at Nova High School in Broward County, Florida, a very different interpretation of ungradedness—yet an interpretation appropriate to their particular student body, who, because of the selective admissions process, is more highly motivated than the average. At Nova, there are no graded courses; all subject matter has been packaged in a number of sequential, pre-written units called LAPs (Learning Activity Packages); *all students* must progress through the sequence of prescribed LAPs. There is no choice of material as at Amherst, but students are

permitted to work at their own achievement levels and at their own rates of learning. Thus Nova has an ungraded English curriculum, and both teachers and pupils seem very happy with the results despite the following: classes are heterogeneous, the school day extends to 4:50 every afternoon, and the school year consists of eleven months, closing only for the month of August! Any candidates for Nova?

Somewhat similar to the Nova sequence of required LAPs are the 121 required *English Concepts,* the pre-written packages of English units constructed for Middletown, Rhode Island's ungraded curriculum. Implicit in the Middletown program is the consensus of the department that all pupils should have the same exposure in English. Yet the principle of individualized learning is not denied, as pupils are allowed to progress through the concepts at their own learning rates; and achievement is measured by newly designed report cards reflecting both the quality and the quantity of the work covered. Accelerated pupils particularly like the provisions for *weighted grading* on the report cards. Other pupils prefer the "no failure" feature. "Even though I'm not a very good student," said one outspoken senior, "I don't feel frustrated about failing. If I do my work, I'm sure of graduating, even if I have to come back next September."

Yet I sensed a certain rigidity in the Florida and the New England programs. In contrast, a wide range of flexibility was in evidence out West. At Union High School in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, teachers and pupils alike were permitted the following alternatives: courses with traditional content and marks, or courses with flexible content and no marks (except *one* grade at the end of the term). The teachers listed their courses as graded or ungraded; the pupils selected their courses on that basis.

Although Union pupils, on the whole, were in favor of the ungraded program, maintaining that they learned more when the pressure for grades was not on, some Union High faculty members were less enthusiastic. "In my ungraded classes where no marks are given there is a low degree of accomplishment by some students capable of excellent work." "I sense a certain frustration on the part of some of my students who are inwardly rebelling against the informality, the lack of organization, and the postponement of the inevitable in classes where no grades are given until the end of the term."

I deduced from the above experience that a sturdy traditionalism and a passion for order are attributes not exclusive to New England

teachers, and that underlying the concept of ungradedness is a pertinent, very persistent question: how much freedom can teachers allow to pupils either in the selection of their courses or in the direction of classroom procedures without abdicating their primary responsibilities as teachers of English?

Another highly experimental Western school has been forced to come to grips with the same question. Valley High School in Las Vegas set up an ungraded curriculum in English a few years ago only to discover after a three-and-one-half year experiment that some order, or common nucleus, was needed. Testing revealed glaring gaps in the literary and linguistic sophistication of their seniors. To correct this, Valley is now requiring all students to take the same basic English course in the 10th year, postponing their electives until the 11th or 12th years. It is interesting to me that Valley researchers have tended to explain the need for this shift in emphasis on Valley's highly mobile student population—1400 withdrawals and 1200 new admissions in one year.

Everywhere I traveled in the West I became more and more convinced that the secret of a good English program lies in the courage and the initiative to experiment on one's own. Dependency upon the data supplied from other school districts or data supplied by professional researchers can often prove fatal. The kind of experimentation I discovered operating in the small county of Azusa, California, for example, outclassed much of the experimentation in the larger systems of California. In these systems I often observed professional researchers who had become so fascinated with their giant computers and the mechanics of flexible and modular scheduling that they seemed to have lost sight of *content,* reflecting an almost robot-like callousness over what was being offered to the pupils once they reached the classroom.

Not so at the ungraded Azusa Continuation School where an individual, even *personal,* environment was being created for pupils between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, who had shown themselves by their previous school performance to be emotionally incapable of benefiting from their traditional school experience. Two hundred non-achievers had been siphoned off from high schools in the Azusa district and brought together in this very special school, where a highly dedicated principal and his staff were working on a *personal* basis with them.

These capable but tuned out young people were all well on their way to becoming a total loss to themselves and to society. None of them were mentally retarded, the I.Q.'s averaging from 110 to 120, a few

ranging above 140. Among them were the marijuana smokers, the "hard core" dope users, pregnant girls (some married—some not), law breakers and "offenders" of all kinds, yet most of them more sinned *against* than sinning. Who would cast the first stone against the pregnant girl raped by a member of her own family—the boy from whose grotesquely disfigured face I tried so desperately not to recoil, burned in a house fire in his childhood—or the adolescent boy pouring out his beautiful but angry epics about his hero-father, brutally stabbed in a barroom brawl a few years ago?

Some had tuned out; others had rebelled; all were seriously alienated from their environment. Yet the staff at Azusa are convinced that since emotional disturbances appear *first* and most strongly in the *communication area,* by getting these sad young people to communicate with their teachers and with each other on a *personal basis,* they can be brought to unburden themselves and take the first difficult step back to life. By getting them to learn to use the tools of language effectively, by placing them in a totally ungraded curriculum and in a personal relationship with their teachers where no subject is taboo, and by designing the ungraded curriculum (often by hand) to allow time for free discussion and to relate to the needs of each class, even to each pupil if necessary, Azusa is engaged in a highly sensitive experiment of major social significance.

Thus far there are some failures to report: of the several pupils singled out as being so severely addicted to drugs as to need clinical help, the latest communication from the clinic indicates *97% appearing to be chronic,* with only 3% giving any substantial evidence of progress toward recovery. On the bright side of the ledger, however, are two boys (I.Q. range 142-160) non-achievers in a traditional system, who in the ungraded program have passed the College Boards and entered Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford University respectively, all to the supreme elation of the Azusa faculty.

Even with their most stubborn, hard core juveniles innovative Californians have not given up hope. A second continuation school has evolved from the hopes of the first. In a shelter in the hills (not too unlike the Civilian Conservation Camps of the Thirties) Azusa is engaged in a "last ditch" attempt to redeem her lost children. For those pupils who have not responded to the ungraded program, this camp in the hills has but two starkly defined objectives:

1. to impress these adolescents with the importance of doing something regularly (such as attending school and arriving

on time every day).

2. to get them to SMILE (to respond without outward hostility to their environment).

I could not conclude this paper without reference to the ungraded program which has influenced me the most, that of the Corvallis High School English Department in Corvallis, Oregon. It is what Corvallis has done that has given me the confidence to do the same. A small but not seriously disadvantaged community, they have developed *on their own initiative* an excellent and workable program in ungraded studies in English without seeking either federal funds or the assistance of an imported research staff—an equivocation at best in any small school system! Their successful program is the result of the genuine concern of individual members of the department over glaring weaknesses in their traditional program—this despite the fact that all testing results confirmed the superiority (both locally and nation-wide) of their traditional program. "Teaching intuition" led them to challenge the flattering test results, and the outcome is the Corvallis program, structured on phase levels but requiring pupils to follow a certain sequence in selecting English courses.

At Marblehead we are planning to follow the pattern of individual staff initiative and are now engaged in developing a program of ungraded studies to be called the Marblehead Deck Plan. Like Corvallis, we believe that the experimentation in education which will make the real difference in the long run is not so much what is produced by the professional researchers with the giant computer as what is germinated from the initiative and "teaching intuition" of our classroom teachers. Thus we believe that our individually tailored ungraded program of English studies will bring out the best in faculty and pupil alike by appealing directly to the personal initiative and the infinite potential of both.